



Idaho Senator Larry Craig: VETERANS UPDATE

Summer, 2006

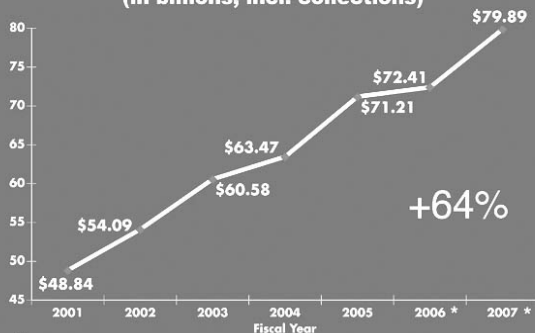


President Lincoln said that we have a special obligation to care for those who have "borne the battle, his widow and his orphan." As Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am pleased to report that we are doing a better job of fulfilling Lincoln's vision – veterans are now among the highest priorities of Congress. In this past year we have increased funding for veterans' programs, improved access to health care, and worked to enhance educational programs for veterans. Much remains to be done, but we are working hard to make life better for veterans everywhere. I hope you find this update helpful.

Larry E. Craig, U.S. Senator

Total VA Appropriation

(in billions, incl. collections)



Record Budget

At the end of 2000, the federal government took in \$1.789 trillion in revenue. The Bush tax cuts stimulated the economy and more revenue is coming in than ever before – last year tax revenues were up 20 percent – \$2.154 trillion.

On the spending side, VA's budget has grown by 64 percent since President Bush took office, nearing almost \$80 billion annually. Next year's budget for VA health care will be 11.5 percent larger than it is this year. (Overall inflation has been averaging less than 3 percent per year during the Bush presidency.)

All of us are committed to making life and services better for veterans, but can double-digit, annual increases in VA's budget be sustained over the long haul? I want to avoid a crisis in VA's world-class health system, so as Chairman of the Veterans' Committee, I have started a dialogue with national veterans' organizations about my budget concerns. It will take all of us working together to find the solutions that will work for everyone.

Stolen VA Computer and Hard Drive Recovered

I was relieved at the end of June when a laptop computer and external hard drive were recovered after being stolen from the home of a VA employee. The hard drive contained the Social Security numbers and personal information on 26.5 million veterans and active duty personnel. **An FBI analysis indicates the information was not accessed, removed or copied.**

As an extra precaution, VA officials are in the process of hiring a leading data analysis company to perform complex monitoring that will detect patterns of irregularities in the data of our nation's veterans.

Veterans' Housing and Benefits Act Becomes Law

In June President Bush signed into law legislation I sponsored (S. 1235) to help severely injured veterans. It authorizes VA to make grants available – ranging from \$2,000 to \$14,000 – to assist with housing adaptations on a family member's home in which a severely disabled veteran is living. Until we changed the law, severely disabled veterans had to own their homes to qualify for adapted housing grants. That didn't make sense for many young people who live with parents after sustaining life-altering injuries.

The new law also allows servicemembers, who have been legally determined to be totally disabled when they separated from the military, to have up to two years from that date to apply for premium-free Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance coverage. The legislation also enables them to convert their coverage to Veterans' Group Life Insurance, or an individual plan or policy, during the same two-year period.



Last year Congress passed and President Bush signed into law the "Wounded Warrior" legislation I sponsored. It provides anywhere from \$25,000 to \$100,000 for those servicemembers seriously wounded since the beginning of the War on Terror. Over 2,500 servicemen and women have received payments so far - including 15 from Idaho. This year, in appreciation, the Wounded Warrior Project presented me with their flag, which is now displayed in the hearing room of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Maintaining Dignity at Military Funerals

There is a fringe group who has used its free speech rights to disrupt funerals of our military heroes. That is why I joined my colleagues to put reasonable restrictions on demonstrations at military cemeteries. I sought an amendment balancing the rights of grieving families; the rights of private property owners who live near cemeteries; and the rights of demonstrators to have their message heard. The amendment was accepted, the bill was passed, and it is now federal law.



In May the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs conducted a hearing on VA technology research. A new prosthetic hand was demonstrated at the hearing and within about one minute after sensors were attached to my forearm – I was stunned to be able to pick up a glass of water with it.

New VA Medical Clinic Coming to Idaho

VA officials recently announced that a new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) will be opened in Caldwell. VA is now working to determine whether to build a new facility or lease an existing site. I expect it to open as early as next year. VA operates a major medical center in Boise, as well as outpatient medical clinics in Pocatello, Twin Falls and Lewiston.

Legislation to Allow Veterans to Use HSAs

Health Savings Accounts are a new trend in health care – already three million Americans have opened HSAs. With an HSA, individuals or companies can contribute to an account on a pre-tax basis and then withdraw the money to pay for health care. When coupled with a high-deductible, low-premium health insurance policy, HSAs allow people to provide for their own health care needs and those of their families – tax free. Right now veterans cannot benefit from the tax savings, so I have introduced legislation (S. 3655) which will provide tax savings for veterans using HSAs.

Benefits Bill Moving Forward

A comprehensive benefits bill I authored with other members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, (S. 2694), is now before the U.S. Senate. Among its provisions are changes to the Montgomery G.I. Bill and VA's education program for survivors and dependents. If approved, veterans and survivors will be allowed to obtain accelerated benefits for education programs leading to jobs in five targeted sectors of the economy: **transportation, construction, hospitality, energy and high technology.**

The nursing home care provision would also save money for Idaho taxpayers. Under the proposal, VA would pay full costs for some service-connected veterans living in state-run veterans' homes, and require VA to provide medications for certain service-connected conditions for veterans living in those facilities. The federal government now only pays a portion of those costs.

The bill would also allow VA to designate beds in privately-run care centers as "state homes." In large portions of Idaho, we often don't need a full-fledged nursing home for veterans – but having a few beds available will allow us to keep a veteran closer to home and loved ones. Other measures would:



Representatives of the University of Idaho met in Washington, DC, on June 20, to announce a new scholarship for wounded veterans and their spouses. From left to right: University of Idaho President Timothy P. White, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, University of Idaho Student Body President Humberto M. Cerrillo II, Sen. Larry Craig, Dr. Karen White, Sen. Mike Crapo and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson.

- Allow tribes to apply for grants to establish veterans cemeteries on Native American lands
- Improve efforts to prevent homelessness among veterans, especially among those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Establish an Office of Rural Health in the Office of the Under Secretary for Health

Unemployment Trends

As a group, working-age veterans do better than non-veterans when it comes to being employed. For the second quarter of 2006, 3.5 percent of veterans nationally were unemployed, compared with 4.6 percent of non-veterans. *In Idaho, the overall unemployment rate for all residents is 3.5 percent.*

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Freedom to Hire a Lawyer

I recently introduced a legislation (S. 2694) to overturn a prohibition on attorneys that has existed since the Civil War. Under current law, all veterans are prohibited from hiring a lawyer to help them navigate the VA claims processing system, until they have spent months – sometimes years – exhausting VA's administrative process. My proposal would allow veterans to hire an attorney at the start of the process, if they want. The bill now awaits action by the full Senate.

Veterans to Benefit From New Health Care Legislation

At the end of December, the Senate passed legislation I sponsored (S. 1182), the Veterans Health Care Act of 2005, which sends a powerful message to the troops that we support them and will continue to support them when they return home. If approved by the House of Representatives, VA will be allowed to:

- Hire Marriage and Family Therapists to provide services and counseling to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and their families.
- Expand the number of clinical care providers dedicated to the treatment of PTSD
- Expand tele-health initiatives in rural areas – this is especially important for Idaho
- Increase mental health services in Community Based Outpatient Clinics
- Employ veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan to reach out to returning National Guard and Reservists
- Provide up to 14 days of care for newborns of female veterans

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Sign up for e-news for veterans at:
<http://veterans.senate.gov>

Expanding SBA Loan Program For Military Reservists

I have co-sponsored a bill (S. 3122) to improve the Small Business Administration's Military Reservist Economic Injury Disaster Loan program. It raises the maximum loan amount for military reservists from \$1,500,000 to \$2,000,000, permits the SBA to offer military reservists unsecured loans up to \$25,000, and ensures that eligible small businesses receive priority loan application processing and approval. The legislation is now part of the SBA reauthorization bill and awaits full Senate action.

U.S. Cemeteries in Europe and North Africa

The U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has jurisdiction over American battlefield cemeteries and monuments located around the globe. As part of our oversight responsibilities, this year I led a delegation of Senators to visit cemeteries in Belgium, Holland, France and North Africa. It was humbling to stand at the final resting place of thousands of American servicemen and women.

If you plan to travel abroad, I encourage you to contact my office and ask for an information packet on the American battlefield cemeteries.



Ethel Hohnstein contacted my office as soon as she learned that I would be at the American Cemetery in North Africa. Her brother died there during WWII and no member of the family has ever been able to visit his grave. It was an emotional moment for me to stand in North Africa while speaking by phone to Ethel in Idaho, and assure her that her brother's grave is extremely well cared for.

In Idaho Last Year . . .

- VA spent over \$314 million while serving the state's 132,000 veterans
- VA medical facilities had 2,912 inpatient and more than 219,000 outpatient visits
- Over 1,500 VA home loans were approved
- Over 2,300 veterans used the GI Bill